

TABLE of EXPERTS

WOMEN WHO DESIGN

The *Albany Business Review* hosted Beth Lacey and Daria Mallin for a discussion on their careers in architecture and the challenges women face in a male-dominated industry. The discussion was moderated by Sierra Kehn of the *Albany Business Review*.

Can you map the path that led you to a career in architecture?

Beth Lacey: As a child, I really loved to build. I had an extensive collection of Legos and built cities, rocket ships, anything. I also built with girder and panel kits and built a whole series of modular custom Barbie houses. We got boxes from the grocery store and I made them into rooms and I would put them together. We could have a city, we could have a mansion. I set them up and my little sister wanted to play. That's when I'd leave because setting it up was far more fun.

In high school, I excelled in math and physics and my guidance counselor steered me toward engineering. I got a Bachelor of Science in mechanical engineering from Clarkson University and went on to get a Bachelor of Architecture from Cornell University. I worked for a large design firm for 10 years, where I got to work on embassies around the globe and a new Veteran's cemetery in Saratoga. At that point, I was ready to do something on my own.

I started small with projects in my community, like renovating Cardona's Market on Delaware Ave. It was wonderful to get feedback and work a project from start to finish, to know the client completely and have the community involved and receptive to what I had done.

Now, as we've evolved for about 16 years, my partnership includes three gentlemen whose expertise is heavy in preservation. They bring in that other extreme of what I've started. We're doing a small pavilion restoration on Ellis Island right now. Learning from my partners is part of what I love about architecture. It's wonderful constantly learning new things about new professions and new businesses.

Daria Mallin: I was born and raised here in the Capital District, and in 1983 when I was 3, my father started the firm that I'm now a part of, with two other partners from RPI. I grew up as an only child and was with my parents a lot. My mom was a planner and my dad is an architect, and I wound up going

to a lot of public review meetings, going out on job sites, seeing construction, drawing at my dad's drawing table with him. I was immersed in planning and design as long as I can remember.

As a youth who was fiercely independent, I wasn't going to take the direction that my parents went. I went to undergrad at Cornell to study human development. I wound up being in human development for two years and found the material to not be fulfilling for me.

I switched to design and environmental analysis, and I double-majored in facilities planning and management and ergonomics – two very different scales of how the human relates to the world around them. I took as many architecture and structures and engineering courses at Cornell as I could get my hands on, and when I graduated, worked at our firm for two years and decided to go to grad school at RPI.

I've been at Envision for my entire career. Now it's three women who own the firm, and we're learning a lot from each other.

What are the challenges of being a woman in a male-dominated field? And are there additional challenges for a woman in an ownership position?

Lacey: There are challenges in any profession being a woman in the top position. Culturally, more and more, people see women's names in top positions, so in my lifetime that has really changed. I try to impart that on my daughter, because she's 21 now and in an engineering field. I want to tell her to respect and love the situation she's in and that it is continuing to become more equal. She is lucky enough to see it more equal than I ever did.

I don't generally think, "Oh, I'm a woman, they're men," until the moment it becomes that and something is said that's just off. In general, that's a hard thing to take care of, but there are ways. I think it helps now that I'm a little older and have more experience not only in my field, but also in dealing with people. I can do that better, so it's a little easier to gain that respect quickly.

One of the interesting things that I think is a benefit of being a woman in a leadership position is that you're memorable because you're often the only one in the room. They remember your name because you're not one of the other 20 men. But there are some challenges. Sometimes, especially when working with the older generation, it takes a while to gain their trust and respect. But that's changing, and it's good.

What are the advantages of being a woman in your industry?

Mallin: There are quite a few. We bring a lot to the table that we can talk about. As of January 2017, there were 11.6 million women-owned businesses in the United States employing over 9 million people, and they're generating \$1.7 trillion in revenue. So, women have this huge hold on where this country, and the economy, are going. More and more, women in leadership positions want to work with other women who are in these positions because they feel more comfortable with them, or they feel more supported. They feel heard, and that can be an advantage.

What are your experiences with New York state's women business enterprise certification?

Mallin: It's been tough in our office. We are fully women-owned, and we make all of the decisions between the three of us. The state is doing what it can to promote the goals of the program, which are fantastic, and I give them a lot of credit. But they're also in a circumstance where there was a wave of people and businesses that weren't necessarily legitimately women-owned and operated within the terms the state wanted them to be. And the state's really looking at it through a very precise lens right now. It hasn't been an easy application process for us, but we are definitely making headway and we're getting a lot of encouragement now from the state. We're hoping to see certification within the next six months.

Are there certain building types or client types where women are more accepted?

Lacey: I really like the higher education, college and university market for a variety of reasons. First, they build a lot, they do renovations, they have a collection of buildings on campus that they have to take care of, and they have ever-changing populations, goals and attitudes. The education market changes all the time, whether it's growing, whether it's shrinking, whether the focus is this particular degree program or another, or what the students want and what they expect. There's constant change on the campuses and I love working with a client that knows what they're trying to do and that knows building is not just a one-off. They know how to work with architects, know how to work with contractors, and nothing is a big surprise to them as how projects go.

I also feel they generally are very open and respectful to women. If you look around the population in this region, we have over the last decade or so had some very strong female leadership for the colleges in the area. Sometimes individual owners are a little more difficult to work with, largely because you have to spend a lot of time educating. I think that's my opportunity to help them understand that working with a woman is comfortable, because I tend to spend more time educating about the process. I don't just say, "This will be the best solution." I'll give you an explanation of why it's the best and what considerations we thought about. Architects think about a lot when we bring a design to the table. People don't understand how many thoughts and how many aspects we've thought about. It may look pretty and that might be what the client cares about, but the fact is that it's functional, it isn't going to break down, it's not going to take on water, it's going to be operational, maintainable and look good for 30- to 50 years in the future. Those are all things that I try



Beth Lacey, left and Daria Mallin.

DONNA ABBOTT-VLAHOS

to explain to my clients. I'm not saying men don't, but I think women explain more.

Mallin: In our firm, Jen Robillard leads our health care design practice. Health care is related to caregiving, and women are traditionally seen as caregivers in

families, as well as the primary caregivers in health care facilities. I think Jen would agree that there is a rapport that tends to develop between the architect and the end users on health care projects, and sometimes it ends up being a group of women discussing a certain way and also building relationships, and col-

MEET THE PANELISTS



BETH LACEY, AIA

**Founding partner
Lacey Thaler Reilly Wilson
Architecture & Preservation**

The founding partner of Lacey Thaler Reilly Wilson Architecture & Preservation, Beth has broad experience in the management, design, and construction of a wide range of projects including planning, feasibility studies, adaptive reuse, renovation, and new buildings.

This breadth of experience sits upon core knowledge from a mechanical engineering degree from Clarkson University and an architecture degree from Cornell.

Beth has a strong background in college and university work with projects at multiple SUNY campuses, Siena, Princeton, Cornell, and others. She continues to expand her knowledge of other project types designing: maker spaces, churches, libraries, offices, apartments, a new VA cemetery, U.S. Embassies abroad, and even a temporary pigeon research facility.

Beth serves her community as an executive board member of the Albany Parking Authority and St. Catherine's Center for Children. She lives on Washington Park in Albany with her husband, while keeping tabs on their three college-age children.



Lacey Thaler Reilly Wilson
Architecture & Preservation, LLP



DARIA MALLIN, AIA

**Managing Principal
ENVISION Architects DPC**

Daria Mallin, AIA, is managing principal at ENVISION Architects DPC and serves as president. She contributes a dynamic set of skills to the leadership of the firm. She is a vision-driven designer and passionate collaborator who believes communication and coordination are essential to the success

of project teams. Her 20 years of experience in the profession is complemented by her education in architecture, human-environment relations, and facilities planning and management, bringing a well-rounded sensibility to her work and design philosophies. Daria leads the firm's work in educational and cultural and community projects. She and her business partners, Jennifer Robillard and Kelly Klopfer, are committed to the firm's mission of leading design and advancing communities.



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DONNA ABBOTT-VLAHOS

laborating from different angles in a way that doesn't always happen otherwise. Sometimes the end user is more apt or comfortable to speak when it is a room full of women.

In cultural and community projects, I've experienced a different phenomenon where not-for-profit groups aren't doing projects continually like health care and educational clients are. They're doing a lot of foundation work, a lot of development, and their focus is really on outreach and education, and also how do they raise money to survive. Their day-to-day focus isn't facilities. And sometimes I feel like they really appreciate the, "Let's start at zero and explain to you what to expect from your architect, and have a conversation about what you know and what you don't know, and it's okay to not know all of this. We're going to guide you through it." I think those conversations frequently happen more easily amongst women or when a woman is leading that process than when a man is, and it's a phenomenon that I don't understand, but I experience it. And I spoke about the one client who said that's basically why she preferred to work with women.

In what ways do you encourage diversity in the workplace?

Mallin: That vision has been part of our firm for quite some time. I remember when I was younger and the firm was 30 people, and how robust it was, and that so many people were from different countries, and I just thought that was the coolest thing - coming to work and learning where everyone was from. Now we're a firm of about 20 people, 50 percent of whom are women. It's all women in leadership and ownership and executive positions. We have very strong female designers, very strong male designers, and everyone has the same opportunity. Right now we're about 20 percent first-generation Americans, so we still have that layer of different backgrounds, and what people bring to the table when they've lived somewhere else or have been educated somewhere else. It's vital to the way we work. We love throwing ideas around, and when your sphere of experience is bigger, so are the ideas.

Lacey: We have people with different levels of training. Some were schooled locally, some were schooled

in the city, in the country, are working towards being a licensed architect, but have a two-year degree or have a master's degree - all these different levels.

"Diversity" is about diversity in your experience as well. We have a multi-faceted firm and it's an interesting thing whenever we look at how we integrate with our clients, who we're designing for. We're designing for the world. We're designing for the public and trying to keep that always in mind because not everyone is going to have the same experience coming in the door.

Have you personally experienced sexism, discrimination or bullying in your industry? And what techniques do you have for dealing with those issues in the workplace?

Lacey: The short answer is of course. In any industry, especially being in it as long as I have, you will have experienced this. Has it been to a point that it's made me want to quit? No. Each experience has made me sit back and think about how I want to handle it the next time. It can be very subtle. Explaining it to other people is always difficult, because when you reiterate a situation, it kind of falls apart. You had to be there is the answer. It's like death by a thousand pinpricks. It's a diminishment of your authority or position or even just your knowledge base. So, I tend to come out now a little strong on examples of my experience or knowledge, explain the situation straight up front, get the first word in, and then if it devolves I tend to address it right away. Sometimes it ends up making other people uncomfortable, but usually that's the end of it.

I try to make sure that other women in my firm, especially because our workplace involves the construction field, are aware of situations and that they are in a position that if something comes up, they can say something, they can comfortably address it. I've had to defend the situation, fall back and tell a contractor, "That's not appropriate. That won't happen again."

With a surge in STEM and STEAM programs throughout the nation and a focus on energizing these areas of interest in young girls and women, what perspective would you give to those pioneering these programs?

Mallin: On my original path in human development, therapy for kids through art, I was a camp counselor, I was a nanny, and I really enjoyed seeing kids work with their science kit, or their microscope kit, or their blocks, because it reminded me so much of me.

Being able to inspire that type of curiosity with these groups is a tremendous opportunity. I was lucky enough to work a day in the Future Cities program over at Latham Ridge and took a group of sixth graders through, "How to think about scale." What an abstract thought, this thing doesn't equal itself, it equals something else. How do you articulate that and teach sixth graders about it?

It's about constantly inspiring curiosity and demystifying these concepts for everyone equally. Boys can learn about scale, girls can learn about scale. It's leveling the playing field and letting things grow up from it in a really equal way. I say try not to think about gender when you're forming these STEAM and STEM programs. Put it all out there in a way that's interesting, and the kids who are curious are going to latch onto it.

Lacey: We're working with the Central Avenue BID, which bought St. Patrick's School on Central Avenue to develop it as a maker space they are calling the STEAM Garden, it includes an incubator space for people that are trying to develop something. It's creating this nucleus of talent, a place where these people can gather and work together before they get something off the ground, and an incubator above it. But they'll also have places where young students can come in and experience the space. It's not just for widening opportunities for girls, but given the community around it, there are opportunities for local children to see a different future.

Mallin: That's the beauty of it. As these kids come in and see that women and men are both doing this from a very young age, and then they'll see there are boys and girls in high school there, and that some of the teachers are women and so are the professors. That's when that accumulating snowball effect starts breaking down the barriers and the prescribed roles that some of these kids came from at home. And while it may not be focused on bringing women up, it's helping open the world up and leveling the playing field and differentiating less and getting boys and girls interested in going to that science and engineering school that's around the block from them. When we all come up together, we're better for it.

The American Institute of Architecture last put out the percentage of licensed female architects at only 20 percent. Why such a large gap?

Lacey: It's not a number that I can explain completely. I think that in general people are waiting longer to become licensed. They changed how the test is given. Now you can take it at your own pace, and I don't know if that helps or hurts the number of people that are taking it. I'm not sure just what's causing less and less licensed architects. You don't need to be licensed to practice, and sometimes there's not the economic boost that there is in other fields when you get a credential. The test costs money and it takes time.

There's a bit of an economic aspect that draws the female number down as well. The economic downturn hit the whole architecture/engineering/construction industry like the proverbial ton of bricks. Clients that had money for a project the year before didn't the year after. All those cultural institutions that looked to donations or had their money socked away in accounts, their money just dropped.

Mallin: They went into survival mode.

Lacey: The field became very difficult and a lot of people left the field. We're finding a hard time finding people with 10 years of experience. They're not there. Also, I think that the workplace for architecture has historically been one of long hours. I worked for a big firm and the culture was to work well above 40 hours a week.

Mallin: It's like a badge in some firms.

Lacey: That culture's starting to wear off, thank goodness.

And then if, as I did, you get married and want to have children, taking time off left a mark. I had comments much later, "Oh, you're back?" So, leaving the field just happens more organically, I think, for women. Women tend to say, "I'm not satisfied here. I'm going to find another place," a little easier than men do. Women will drift off into supporting fields or completely different fields that use those tools and techniques that we learn in design school of crafting and solving problems. Design school is all about that. Women can take those tools and move into a different careers. I think that happened quite a bit and still continues to happen.

Mallin: Yes. What are the alternative career paths that don't require five, seven, whatever it is now, exams to get licensed? And also, what other careers allow women that really enjoy being the caregiver have that role, whether it's for their own kids or elder care or caring for another type of family member. Those decisions, combined with the economy, created part of the phenomenon.

Can you share your perspectives on mentorship?

Mallin: I don't think I'd be leading without mentors. Those are the people who have been inspiring and encouraging, and I personally believe that having an array of mentors with different backgrounds, different genders, different ages, is really important for perspective. My mentor, Ralph Steinglass in New York City, is with Teambuilders. He was an architect first and foremost and now works with architects through team building, transition and succession planning. Bonny Boice is a Whole Life leader in the region. She's doing amazing things, to help people find more whole-life balance. That kind of mentorship makes anyone's approach more well-rounded, which is really important. To grow, you have to be uncomfortable and you have to be inspired. Mentors can bring those conversations out.

I've mentored at least a dozen students and interns in our firm. I try to not come with just the leader-architect perspective. If I don't know the answer or if I feel really strongly about something, I want them to

also go talk to other people and other mentors.

The leadership in our firm has a great set of mentors. Kelly Klopfer, one of our partners, has been doing an amazing job mentoring our staff and helping some of them break out of their molds, if they're inclined to, and help them become more successful overall or become a future leader. The more dimensional mentorship is, the more successful it is.

Lacey: Mentorship is a whole bevy of things. My partners, Mark Thaler, Steve Reilly and Dan Wilson, have this amazing knowledge of preservation. Preservation isn't included in a basic architecture education, but it's all around our built environment. Each era and building type has a history. When you're renovating a building, especially one that's over 50 years old, it's understanding those archaic assemblies, how people built then, what you should expect when you take the floorboards up, what you should expect when you open up the wall. Those are things that take years of experience to learn. Having guided experience in house is tremendous.

We're doing a project in Saratoga Universal Preservation Hall with Proctors, turning an old church

nary design or even construction administration, and they are still trying to learn. Every other Monday, we have a lunch that's either a topic or a roundtable. If someone's really struggling with test material that they're studying, or if they're struggling with something that they've been hearing going on in the office that they want to know more about, we really open it up. It's for the licensed and the non-licensed, but we encourage the non-licensed to come and put on their professional development hat and pick our brains. We're going to give you an hour to ask whatever you want. It's part of our group mentoring, and it's especially fulfilling to me when I sit back and see them mentor each other.

Lacey: Architecture, in general, is very team-oriented.

What advice can you give young women thinking of entering your field?

Mallin: Be multi-faceted and have multi-faceted interests. Architecture is so many different things. We've talked about 20 out of 200 things today that we could be talking about. Be curious. Ask as many

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DARIA MALLIN, managing principal at ENVISION Architects DPC.

into a performing arts venue. It's very difficult making sure that everyone's going to be comfortable and have all the amenities that they want in that type of experience, and then understanding how it works to build a new addition that will be the new box office and entry, which is all glass and modern materials. How do you put those two things together so that they are harmonious? Those points provide mentoring on a finer more technical scale. We also have to do the same things with our staff to be sure we mentor them in their development as well-rounded architects.

Mallin: One thing that's effective in our firm is the mentorship program for our intern development program. We might have people who are on a really long project that's in design for, say, a year and a half and they're not getting the experience doing contract documents or participating in proposals or prelimi-

questions as possible. Get great mentors. Know that there are infinite facets that you could be involved with. Be inspired by that and not be intimidated by it.

Lacey: Don't take everything personally and don't think you need to know everything. I got into the workforce and people were really delicate about saying, "I don't like it." It was hard for me to know where I was going because I didn't get the negative responses that I was so used to getting in school. It took me a while to realize how to present that information and propose other options to people and guide people to open up and tell them that I could take it. But there were also clients that were not afraid to dish it out as well. Learn to separate yourself a little bit from what you've created and to certainly understand you're never going to know it all. That's why I love architecture, because I like to learn new stuff every day. ■

TRANSCRIPT LIGHTLY EDITED FOR SPACE AND CLARITY.

Thank you to our participants



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